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## Organizational Identification Strategies of a Low Face-to-Face Member-Contact Organization

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### Abstract

This study looked at the identification seeking strategies of a low face-to-face member-contact organization, *The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi*. I used thematic analysis to identify the strategies that the organization used to seek the identification of its members. Findings of the study showed that by emphasizing membership as an exclusive privilege, recognizing the individual as a symbol of excellence, celebrating member achievements, inviting member contributions, emphasizing commitment to diversity, emphasizing organizational symbolism and highlighting testimonials of appreciation, the organization tried to seek the identification of its members. In many of the above-mentioned strategies, the overarching theme of elitism was evident. This raises certain pertinent questions pertaining to organizational identification.

*Keywords: organizational identification, identification strategies*

### Introduction

Member identification is important for any organization. Early research in the area of organizational identification revealed that organizational identification leads to decision-making consonant with the values and beliefs of the organization (Simon, 1977). In more recent years, research in the field of organizational identification has revealed that organizational identification is linked to a host of other variables like organizational commitment, support, loyalty, and a variety of organizational citizenship behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998; Van Dick, Grojean, Christ, & Wieseke, 2006). Hence, organizations use a variety of rhetorical strategies to gain the identification of their members (Adler, 1995; Cheney, 1983a; Vaughn, 1997). In addition to rhetorical strategies, the communal organizational experience also strengthens identification. However, not all organizations provide the opportunity for members to experience the feeling of community. In spite of that they continue to survive and flourish. This study examines the identification strategies employed by one such organization, The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi.

Most studies in the field of organizational identification have examined the identification strategies of organizations where members actively participate in the organization in a face-to-face context and consequently, experience the physical presence of the organization. However, studies have not looked at how a low face-to-face member-contact organization seeks the identification of its members (Low face-to-face member-contact organization does not imply that the organizational members meet virtually. The communication is mainly one-sided in the form of e-mail newsletters, the print magazine and the organization-

al website). Hence, this study examines the identification strategies of such an organization.

An examination of the identification strategies of such an organization is important because, as pointed out by Scott (2001), in spite of the numerous advantages that mediated communication technologies offer organizations, the use of these technologies could result in reduced levels of attachment among organizational members because of the prevalence of one-way information sharing and limited interactivity. One-way information sharing and limited interactivity make organizational members vulnerable to the influence of other identification seeking entities; previous research has indicated individuals come under the influence of multiple organizational entities and individuals identify differentially with each of these entities (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Scott, 1997, 2007). In essence, it can be said that multiple identities may compete for securing individuals' identification (Scott, 1997). Hence, it is important to understand how an organization faced with the challenge posed by limited interactivity and one-way information sharing seeks the identification of its members. As mentioned before, organizational identification is important for any organization because of the variety of benefits it can reap from strongly identified members.

This study contributes to the existing research in organizational identification in two major ways. First, it looks at how an organization seeks identification in the context of an unconventional form of organizing. Organizing is unconventional, considering the fact that the organization has very little face-to-face or personal contact with its members. Second, it points to the fact that the nature of organizing may be a major factor that influences the kind of identification strategies an organization may adopt. In addition to the two major contributions, the implications of the study also raise certain pertinent questions associated with organizational identification. This report begins with an examination of the literature pertaining to organizational identification, followed by a brief description of the organization (The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi), a description of the method, a presentation of the results, and a discussion of the findings.

### **Organizational Identification**

Cheney (1983a) defined identification as, "an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene" (p. 342). Securing the identification of members is important for organizations. According to Tompkins and Cheney (1983), "A person identifies with a unit when in making a decision, the person in one or more of his or her organizational roles perceives that unit's values or interests as relevant in evaluating the alternatives of the choice" (p.144). Simon (1977) clearly explained this process. According to him, values of the organization are internalized in organizational members and consequently, influence their psychological make-up and attitudes. This, in essence, leads to a sense of attachment or loyalty that ensures that the decisions the individuals make are in consonance with the organizational objectives. In a study of the organizational identification of Teaching Assistants, Tompkins and Cheney (1983) found identification influenced attitudes and behaviors that had consequences for decision-making. Cheney's (1983b) study of a large industrial and

high technology corporation also revealed similar findings. Thus, Cheney (1983b) said organizational identification leads to reformulation of self-images in consonance with the values and beliefs of the organization. In recent years, researchers viewing organizational identification from a social identity perspective have further stressed the importance of organizational identification.

### **Organizational Identification as Social Identification**

According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), "...in relevant intergroup situations, individuals will not interact as individuals on the basis of their individual characteristics or interpersonal relationships, but as members of their groups standing in defined relationships to members of other groups (p.10)." Drawing from the work of these theorists, Ashforth and Mael (1989) looked at organizational identification from the perspective of social identification. According to them, "The individual's organization may provide one answer to the question, who am I?" (p. 22). Thus, organizational identification can lead to the formation of social identity. In a similar vein, Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn (1995) said social identification with an organization leads to a person defining him or herself in terms of the membership of that organization. Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) took a step further and defined organizational identification as the degree to which individual members define themselves in terms of the same attributes they believe the organization has. In short, identification with an organization, as Van Knippenberg and Sleenbos (2006) found, involves psychological oneness with the organization.

Social identification with the organization has a number of important consequences beyond the favoring of organizational interests in day-to-day organizational decision-making. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989), these consequences include internalization of and adherence to organizational values and norms; homogeneity in attitudes and behaviors; intra-group cohesion, cooperation, and altruism (in matters pertaining to the group); organizational commitment, support, and loyalty; and positive organizational evaluations. According to Hogg and Terry (2000), social identification with an organization could lead to prototype-based depersonalization, which could in turn foster organizational cohesion and adherence to organizational norms. Bhattacharya et al. (1995) found that in the case of an art museum, social identification of the members with the organization was positively associated with donating tendencies, membership tenure, and frequency of visits. According to Scott et al. (1998) and Van Dick et al. (2006), identification with an organization leads to the performance of organizational citizenship behaviors. Thus organizational identification, in terms of social identification, leads to organizational commitment, organizational cohesion, adherence to organizational norms and organizational citizenship behaviors.

However, organizational identification in terms of social identification is related to a number of other factors. For instance, Bhattacharya et al. (1995) found social identification of the members with the art museum was positively associated with its prestige. Similarly, Bartels, Pruyn, de Jong, and Joustra (2007), in the case of a regional police organization, and Smidts, Pruyn, and Van Riel

(2001), in the case of a bank, a non-profit customer service company, and a nationally operating utilities company, found perceived organizational prestige positively predicted organizational identification. According to Dutton et al. (1994), attractiveness of the organizational identity, consistency between the individual identity and the organizational identity, distinctiveness of the organizational image, perception of organizational image as enhancing self-esteem, and attractiveness of the external image of the organization strengthen organizational identification. Hence, it is imperative for organizations to inculcate these notions in the minds of their members. This leads to organizations using diverse strategies aimed at inculcating such notions to secure the identification of their members.

### **Strategies Organizations Use to Secure the Identification of Members**

Organizations use a variety of strategies to gain the identification of their members. Cheney's (1983a) study showed organizations used strategies like expression of concern for the individual, recognition of individual contributions, espousal of shared values, advocacy of shared benefits and activities, praise by outsiders, testimonials by employees, expression of the need to unify against a common enemy, expression of the assumed or transcendental "we" and symbolic unification to gain the identification of their members. Similarly Adler (1995), found the expression of shared values and goals, and the assumed or transcendental 'we' in the letters written by two Lutheran church leaders to their brethren. Driskill and Camp (2006) found, in the case of the Nehemiah group (an inter-organizational consortium of churches), the prevalence of rhetorical strategies of identification that emphasized prayer and relationship building. According to Vaughn (1997), high technology organizations used strategies that espoused shared values like innovation, quality, equality, individualism, and teamwork to seek the identification of their members. Connaughton and Jarvis (2004) found the GOP in order to seek the identification of Latino voters depicted them as satisfied citizens and engaged family members in their political advertisements.

Thus, organizations use diverse strategies to engage their members. Most of these strategies stem from the Burkean rhetoric of identification that emphasizes consubstantiality (Burke, 1969). However, the nature of organizing in most of the above-mentioned organizations involves frequent face-to-face contact or the feeling of the physical presence of the organization. Studies have shown that socialization processes that involve social interactions in the organizational context play a major role in creating a sense of identification with the organization. Bourassa and Ashforth (1998) pointed out the socialization process of new crewmembers on an Alaskan fishing trawler through interactions with senior crew members led to their identification with the culture of the trawler. In addition, according to the structural model of organizational identification postulated by Scott et al. (1998), socialization process plays a major role in identity creation. They state that a well-socialized member may have a strong organizational identity as the socialization process contributes to an increase in identity size. According to them, the social interactions that take place in the organiza-

tional context aid in the formation and expressions of identities. Hence, it would be interesting to explore how in the absence of opportunities for socializing members in the traditional manner, which involves frequent contacts with the organization, a low face-to-face member-contact organization tries to secure the identification of its members. Specifically the question that arises is whether the nature of organizing, in terms of the low frequency of contact with the members, especially face-to-face contact, influences the identification strategies that an organization may employ. In order to explore this issue, this study looks at the case of one such organization, The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi.

### **The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi**

The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, founded in 1897, has its headquarters in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The mission of the society is to recognize and encourage superior academic scholarship. Its mission statement is as follows: "To Recognize and promote academic excellence in all fields of higher education and to engage the community of scholars in service to others" ("The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi", n.d.).

The society invites faculty and students, based on their academic and professional excellence, to become members. The society has more than 300 chapters in universities across the United States, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. Each year, the society inducts 30,000 members through its chapters. Since its inception, it has inducted more than a million members. Once inducted, one becomes a member for life. However, to be an active member one has to pay an annual membership fee. In addition, the society also charges national and chapter fees at the time of initiation. Members are eligible for benefits like awards and scholarships, discounts with partner organizations, career-related services like job search, etc ("The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi", n.d.).

In spite of the fact that the organization has chapters in member universities, there are very few meetings or gatherings of members after the initiation ceremony. The chapter directories reveal most chapters did not even have a chapter webpage on their university website. Those that had chapter web-pages did not reveal many activities other than initiation events.

The main organization organizes a triennial convention for its members. However, very few students attend this event. According to Rogow (2007), the current president of the organization, the most recent convention held at Orlando Florida had thirty students participating. He says this was the largest number of students present at any convention in the history of the organization. This number is low considering the fact that the organization has a total of 300 chapters in North America and the Philippines. According to president Rogow, it was for the first time student members were encouraged to attend. He further added

These students added enthusiasm and an exciting dimension to the meeting. Because the society exists to recognize the academically best and brightest students in our colleges and universities, these students need to feel welcomed as full participating members in all aspects of our organization, not just at chapter initiations and meetings. (p. 1)

Consequently, the organization amended its bylaws, which allowed two students to join the Board of Directors in 2010. The question that arises is, in spite of the fact that members rarely meet, how does the organization seek the identification of its members. The question is relevant considering the fact that member identification is essential for the sustenance of this organization as it depends on member contributions, in terms of membership fee and other contributions, for a substantial portion of its funding ("Annual Report", 2005-2006). Moreover, in spite of the low face-to-face member-contact nature of the organization, it has nearly 100,000 active members and the chapters initiate 30,000 members every year. Hence, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

*RQ:* What strategies does The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi use to secure the identification of its members?

## Method

### Text

To identify the strategies used, I examined the membership invitations; the organizational website (Phi Kappa Phi.org); four issues of the print magazine *The Phi Kappa Phi Forum* (fall 2006, winter/spring 2007, fall 2007, and winter/spring 2008); and the monthly e-mail newsletter sent between August 2006 and April 2008 (*Monthly Mentions*). The organizational website, Phi Kappa Phi.org, has information about the history of the organization, chapters, membership, and publications. The print magazine, *The Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, is a quarterly magazine that features articles on a wide variety of general topics, member news, chapter news, society news and other pertinent announcements. *Monthly Mentions* is an e-mail communication that keeps members informed of the opportunities they can avail of and the activities of the society.

### Procedure

I used thematic analysis to explore the identification strategies that The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi employed. I used Owen's (1984) criteria for identifying themes in a relational discourse. Since the motive behind organizational identification strategies is to build a relationship with organizational members to gain their identification, Owen's criteria for identifying themes in a relational discourse was appropriate for this study.

Owen's (1984) criteria for identifying themes in a relational discourse included *recurrence*, *repetition*, and *forcefulness*. In this particular study, I combined 'recurrence' and 'repetition.' According to Owen recurrence was observed, "When at least two parts of a report had the same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning" (p. 275). 'Repetition' is closely tied to 'recurrence'. Owen states, "Criterion two [repetition] is an extension of criterion one [recurrence] in that it is an explicit repeated use of the same wording, while criterion one involves an implicit recurrence of meaning using different discourse" (p. 275). Hence, in this study the criterion 'recur-

rence' not only involved implicit recurrence of meaning, using different words, but also recurrence of meaning through the repetition of the same wording. The following statements are exemplars of the criterion of 'recurrence':

However, Phi Kappa Phi is much more than an emblem and a line on a résumé. It is a global network comprised of the best and brightest from all academic disciplines—a community of scholars and professionals building an enduring legacy for future generations.

Phi Kappa Phi is much more than a line on a résumé. If you choose to accept this once-in-a-lifetime offer, you will join a select community of top scholars and professionals and gain access to resources and Benefits [*sic*] designed to serve your academic and professional needs.

Here, the two statements convey the same meaning that the organizational membership is a membership in a prestigious club of excellence.

The next criterion 'forcefulness' refers to the emphatic nature of the identification messages. Specifically, it involves the use of action verbs, action phrases, action statements, strong verbs, adverbs, adjectives, exclamation marks (!), superlatives, emphatic statements, and bold typefaces. The following statement meets the criterion of forcefulness:

"*Founded* in 1897 at the University of Maine, Phi Kappa Phi is the nation's *oldest, largest, and most* selective honor society for all academic disciplines." Here the use of the action verb *founded*, and superlatives like *oldest, largest, and most* convey the strength of the statement, which communicates the prestigious nature of the society. I used recurrence as the primary criterion for developing categories of identification strategies. Forcefulness indicated the strength of the identification strategies.

To categorize the identification strategies, I used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method involved an initial stage of coding that looked for recurring themes and a final stage of coding that combined similar themes into larger themes. The initial coding resulted in 11 categories. Subsequently, I combined similar categories. For example, I combined categories that reflected the selective nature of the membership and the importance of that membership into a single category called *emphasizing membership as an exclusive privilege*. Similarly, I combined the category that portrayed the individual as a symbol of academic excellence and the category that portrayed the individual as a symbol of excellence in character into a single category called *recognizing the individual as a symbol of excellence*; the category that emphasized no discrimination based on the individual's personal background and the category that portrayed no discrimination based on the individual's academic background into a single category called *emphasizing commitment to diversity*; and the category that referred to testimonials of appreciation for the service offered by the organization and the category that referred to the testimonials of appreciation of the mission of the organization into a single category



called *highlighting testimonials of appreciation*. This resulted in a final set of seven categories.

### Findings

The study sought to explore the identification strategies The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi employed to seek the identification of its organizational members. The findings of the study revealed the evidence of the following identification strategies: emphasizing membership as an exclusive privilege, recognizing the individual as a symbol of excellence, celebrating member achievements, inviting member contributions, emphasizing commitment to diversity, emphasizing organizational symbolism and highlighting testimonials of appreciation.

#### Emphasizing membership as an exclusive privilege

This identification strategy emphasized the selective nature of the organizational membership and the importance of that membership. The organization highlighted that the possession of a membership with it was as an exclusive privilege. The following statements I found on the organizational website highlighted this fact:

The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi is the nation's oldest and most selective all-discipline honor society. Standards for election are extremely high. Membership is by invitation only to the top 10 percent of seniors and graduate students and 7.5 percent of juniors.

These statements convey a message of exclusivity by portraying the selective nature of the membership privilege. To be eligible for membership, an individual has to meet the organizational standards of academic excellence. Thus, the organization is seeking the identification of its members by highlighting its selective nature. Specifically, the organization is conveying the elitist nature of its membership. Similar to the statement mentioned above, I also found another message of exclusivity in the membership invitation, which stated:

Join the million-strong ranks of Phi Kappa Phi and stand along scholars and innovators such as Jimmy Carter, 39<sup>th</sup> President of the United States; James Barksdale, Founder of Netscape; Ellis Marshall, Acclaimed Jazz Musician; Glenna Goodacre, internationally acclaimed sculptor; George Olah, Nobel Prize Winner in Chemistry; John Grisham, Best-Selling Author; Wendy Lawrence, NASA Astronaut; Kim Mulkey-Robertson, Head Women's Basketball Coach at Baylor University; and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Supreme Court Justice.

This statement points out that the organizational membership is a membership in a celebrity club. Celebrity club memberships are not open to everybody. It is the privilege of the elite. This statement like the other statements points to the selective nature of the membership.

In addition, there were other statements that conveyed the importance of selectivity. The following statement, I found on the organizational website highlights the importance of selective membership: "Because Phi Kappa Phi is highly selective, membership is a stamp of academic excellence that is recognized by graduate and professional school admission committees and employers alike." This statement conveys the message that because Phi Kappa Phi is selective in terms of its membership, other institutions recognize its elitist nature.

By highlighting the selective nature of the organizational membership and the importance of selectivity, the organization is seeking the identification of its members by conveying the fact that membership is an exclusive privilege available to the chosen few. Specifically, joining Phi Kappa Phi automatically entitles one to an exclusive club membership that will enhance one's image in the eyes of the professional and the academic community. In short, the messages seem to imply that as a member in this exclusive club, one will stand out in the crowd. Closely tied to the strategy of portraying membership as an exclusive privilege, was the emphasis on organizational symbolism.

### **Emphasizing organizational symbolism**

This identification strategy referred to the emphasis on the use of organizational symbols to instill a sense of organizational pride. Perusal of the organizational publications revealed there was a great emphasis on organizational symbolism. Members were encouraged through the organizational website, monthly e-mails, and *The Phi Kappa Phi Forum* to wear the Phi Kappa Phi regalia like the honor code, the medallion, the Phi Kappa tie, and the stole during graduation ceremonies.

The following message communicated on the organizational website bears testimony to the abovementioned fact: "It's not too late to order! Show your pride of affiliation by wearing one of our distinctive honor cords, stoles, or medallions at your commencement or other special academic ceremony." I also found a similar statement in the merchandise catalog section of *The Phi Kappa Phi Forum*. It said, "Show your pride of affiliation with The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi." These statements point out that the organization sought the identification of its members through the use of organizational symbols. The organization was trying to highlight the fact that Phi Kappa Phi regalia would make members stand out among peers during important events like graduation by communicating the message that they belong to an exclusive club of excellence. Thus, it was indirectly trying to instill a sense of organizational pride in the minds of the individual members.

### **Recognizing the individual as a symbol of excellence**

In addition to portraying organizational membership as an exclusive privilege and emphasizing the use of organizational symbols, another evident identification strategy was the recognition of individual excellence. This identification strategy portrayed the individual as a symbol of excellence, in terms of academics and character, which made him or her eligible for the organizational membership. The organization seemed to convey the message that it has offered the

individual the membership primarily because of his or her individual excellence. The membership invite says, "You have earned this invitation because you are among the very best and brightest on your campus ---- not just in your chosen field of study, but from all academic disciplines." This statement conveys the message that the individual is noted for academic excellence in his or her college, and this has made him or her eligible for the organizational membership. Other statements that point to the same theme include the following: "Congratulations on having met our national eligibility requirements of both sound character and high academic achievement. The nation's oldest, largest, and most selective all-discipline honor society has recognized YOUR [*sic*] outstanding academic achievements." This statement highlights the fact that the individual has become eligible for membership primarily because of his or her excellence in academics and character.

All these statements point to an identification strategy that glorifies the individual as the epitome of excellence. The organization is portraying the individual as a symbol of excellence primarily because of his or her sound character and academic achievement. According to the society, this attribute of excellence has made the individual eligible to be a part of the organization. In addition to the organization's strategy of portraying the individual as an epitome of excellence was the closely related strategy of seeking identification through the celebration of member achievements.

### **Celebrating member achievements**

This identification strategy referred to the recognition and celebration of member achievements. The organizational website published the following messages:

"Three Phi Kappa Phi Members Named Rhodes Scholars (4/2/2008)"

"Four Phi Kappa Phi Members Named 2008 Truman Scholars (4/2/2008)"

"Twenty-Five Members Named 2008 Goldwater Scholars (4/1/2008)"

Phi Kappa Phi members continue to make a name for themselves by earning valuable awards to help advance their education. Of the twenty-three graduate fellowships granted through Alpha Lambda Delta, four of the recipients are members of Phi Kappa Phi.

These statements point out that The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi is proud of its members, and by publishing their achievements in organizational publications, it is recognizing and celebrating their achievements. In fact, the organization actively pursues this identification strategy. For instance, every edition of the Phi Kappa Phi Forum carries the following message: "If you are an author and would like your work to be included in the 'Bookshelf' segment of *Member Focus*, please send a copy of the book along with a one page synopsis..." The Phi Kappa Phi Bookshelf, a part of the section highlighting member achievements in the *Phi Kappa Forum*, displays books written by members. The

Bookshelf carries a picture of the front cover of the book and a brief description of it.

### **Inviting member contributions**

Another theme evident in the messages the organization communicated was the invitation for member contributions. This strategy involved seeking identification by trying to engage members with the organization. Members were encouraged to contribute articles and columns for the *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* and electronic publications. The e-mail newsletter, *Monthly Mentions*, carried the following advertisement:

Looking for Fresh Perspectives: Forum Magazine Needs Members with the "Write" Stuff: At Phi Kappa Phi, we already know our members are both bright and talented. Now we're asking you, our members, to share your thoughts, insights, and expertise with your peers as a feature writer for the Phi Kappa Phi Forum magazine. You may have heard that the Forum is undergoing some changes. It's our hope that these changes -- a fresher presentation and more dynamic, thought-provoking content -- will enrich your Phi Kappa Phi membership. Currently we are seeking writers for the next two issues.

The above statements point out that the organization wishes to utilize the resources of its members and values their insights and opinions. Especially noticeable in this advertisement was the use of the phrase "*our members*." The organization was implying that it was seeking the skills and expertise of its highly valued and talented members. The organizational website also carried a similar advertisement for volunteers at its triennial conference:

Every triennium we depend upon the good work of approximately 100 volunteers to serve on as many as fifteen national committees. Won't you please consider offering your services as a volunteer? Committee work usually involves conference telephone calls and one or more meetings at a central location. All travel expenses are paid for by the Society and meetings are kept to a minimum for the sake of efficiency. This is a wonderful opportunity to get involved on a national level with Phi Kappa Phi and to network with colleagues from around the country

Evident in these advertisements is the message that the organization wants its members to get involved with it. Thus, the organization's invitation for member contribution, in terms of articles and volunteer work, points to the notion that in spite of its low face-to-face member-contact nature, the organization values the skills and expertise of its members and seeks to utilize them. In addition, the organization is also trying to instill in the individual a sense of belongingness by inviting contributions, which has the potential to strengthen identification with the organization.

### **Emphasizing commitment to diversity**

This identification strategy involved emphasizing that the organization values diversity by not discriminating on the basis of an individual's personal background and academic background. Many statements communicated by the organization emphasized the notion that the organization embraces diversity. For instance, the organizational website communicated the following messages:

"Phi Kappa Phi does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, national origin, disability, gender, age, or sexual orientation."

"Phi Kappa Phi Love of Learning Awards are equal opportunity scholarships."

These messages promote the feeling that irrespective of an individual's background, he or she is acceptable as a member of Phi Kappa Phi and is eligible for all member privileges. In addition, there was repeated mentioning of the phrase, "*all-discipline honor society*," in many of the statements of the organizations. Thus, the strategy of portraying the organization as embracing diversity points to the fact that irrespective of an individual's academic or personal background, the society accepts him or her. Apart from these strategies, another strategy that was evident was the publishing of member testimonials.

### **Highlighting testimonials of appreciation**

This strategy referred to the means of gaining identification by publishing testimonials of appreciation for the service offered by the organization and the testimonials of appreciation for the mission of the organization. The organizational website and other publications carried member testimonials. Each testimonial conveyed a member's unique perception about the organization. However, they all highlighted the theme of the members' appreciation of the organization. Some of them are as follows:

Being a part of Phi Kappa Phi has meant a lot to me. Having someone recognize your hard work and achievements throughout college is a great reward. This organization promotes continuous learning and I think that it is a valuable life lesson.

This member views the organization as recognizing the achievements of its members and expresses appreciation for it. Another member said:

I am extremely grateful for the generous award from Phi Kappa Phi. Without this fellowship, I doubt I would have made the decision to attend a private graduate school. At the time, I was very concerned about funding my education, and Phi Kappa Phi gave me the necessary support to realize my dreams.

In the eyes of this member, the organization was an aide in time of need. According to another member,

With the help of Phi Kappa Phi, I was able to see and learn about another part of the world. Understanding the people and culture of Peru made me realize how much more to the world there is than just what I know in the United States.

For this member, the organization provided an opportunity for broadening his or her horizons. All the three testimonials were testimonials of appreciation for the services of the organization.

In addition, an issue of *The Forum* carried a presidential testimonial. The president of the society, Robert Rogow said:

Carol and I are actively supporting the capital campaign because we strongly believe in the mission of The Honor society of Phi Kappa Phi and its recognition of our nation's academically superior students. The newly acquired Headquarters building in Baton Rouge will provide Phi Kappa Phi's superb staff with a befitting environment from which to enhance the society's mission in the years to come.

These statements reflect the president's endorsement and support of the mission of the organization. In fact, it reflects a theme of appreciation of the mission of the organization. Such statements could in turn stimulate similar endorsement and commitment on the part of the members. Specifically, publication of such statements could lead to symbolic convergence of members around common themes, which has the potential to enhance identification.

Thus, the organization used diverse strategies to gain the identification of its members. These strategies celebrated both the individual and the organization and tried to engage the individual actively with the organization. The organization portrayed the individual as a symbol of excellence and the organizational membership as the opportunity for celebrating that excellence. In a strategic manner, the organization portrayed itself as an exclusive club that admitted only the elite. In addition the organization, by publishing member testimonials of appreciation, seemed to be attempting to create symbolic convergence, which could lead to identification with the organization.

## Discussion

### Theoretical implications

This study sought to identify the strategies that a low face-to-face member-contact organization used to gain the identification of its members. The findings revealed the organization sought the identification of its members by portraying membership in the organization as an exclusive privilege, emphasizing organizational symbolism, recognizing the individual as a symbol of excellence, celebrating member achievements, inviting member contributions, emphasizing commitment to diversity, and highlighting testimonials of appreciation. Some of the specific identification strategies this organization used were similar to the identification strategies Cheney (1983a) found in the study of corporate house

organs. Specifically, the recognition accorded to individual achievements and the emphasis on organizational symbolism and testimonials were evident in Cheney's study.

In addition, the study also showed there was a great emphasis in portraying membership in the organization as an exclusive privilege and recognizing the individual member as a symbol of excellence. By portraying the individual as the epitome of excellence and the organizational membership as the opportunity for celebrating that excellence through exclusivity in membership, the organization was establishing a common ground with its members (Cheney, 1983a). In other words, the organization was establishing a common ground with its members by portraying both the individual and the organization as elitist. Elitism as a common-ground strategy has the potential to enhance the attractiveness of the organizational identity, distinctiveness of the organizational image, consistency between the individual identity and the organizational identity, perception of organizational image as enhancing self-esteem, and attractiveness of the external image of the organization. These factors strengthen organizational identification (Dutton et al., 1994). The flavor of elitism also resounded in the identification strategies of organizational symbolism and celebrating member achievements. Thus, elitism was an overarching theme that resounded across multiple identification strategies that the organization used.

Elitism as a strategy is very important, especially in view of the low face-to-face member-contact nature of the organization. However, one could also raise the argument that the organization is prone to using this strategy because the criterion for member selection is based on elite academic standards; but the important aspect is the manner in which the messages of elitism are constructed. Specifically, the way the organization positions the individual relative to itself. The explicit acknowledgement that the individual and the organization are both elitist, through the emphasis on membership as an exclusive privilege and the recognition of the individual as a symbol of excellence, is in a sense conveying the message that both the individual and the organization are located on the same plane. This could be extremely beneficial to the organization as it has the potential to boost the ego of the individual. By pandering the ego of the individual in such a manner, the organization is attempting to overcome the barriers posed by the lack of face-to-face interactions, and sustain and enhance identification. Thus, the nature of organizing seems to have led the organization to use the strategy that reflected notions of elitism in a manner that emphasized its uniqueness and positioned the individual and itself on the same plane. This in turn points to the fact that the nature of organizing may be a major factor that determines the kind of identification strategies that an organization may adopt.

Previous studies have shown the perception of organizational membership as elitist can create a sense of identification in the minds of the members. For instance, Bourassa and Ashforth's (1998) study revealed the elimination of crewmembers who could not survive the harsh conditions in the trawler inspired an elitist feeling in the minds of the survivors, which advanced their initiation into the culture of the ship, and consequently, their sense of identification. In the case of Phi Kappa Phi too, a similar strategy seems to be operating. The sense of

elitism created as a result of being one of the chosen few could lead to a sense of identification with the organization. Creating a dichotomy between members and nonmembers in such a manner can create identities defined by the perception of elitism and prestige that makes members stand apart from nonmembers. This has the potential to enhance identification.

However, the message of elitism is communicated mainly through a mediated environment. The mediated environment in the form of organizational websites and publications is the prime interface between the organization and the individual, and the organization by communicating its identification strategies through the mediated environment is trying to create an imagined sense of organizational belongingness. In other words, the organization, through the mediated environment, is attempting to socialize its members and hence, create a sense of identification. Specifically, the organization is attempting to create an identity structure for the individual through a one-sided mediated communication. Future research should look at whether this strategy pays dividends for the organization in terms of securing the identification of the members. This is important because, as mentioned previously, the use of mediated communication technologies could result in reduced levels of attachment among organizational members because of one-way information sharing and limited interactivity (Scott, 2001). Furthermore, research has also shown that multiple entities compete for an individual's sense of identification (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010; Scott, 1997, 2007). Hence, understanding the efficacy of identification strategies communicated primarily through mediated channels is important.

### **Areas of Future Research**

In this context, it would also be interesting to explore how individual members view the organization and their role as organizational members. Hence, future studies should explore the organizational identification of the members of the Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi. Such a study would reveal the persuasive efficacy of the identification strategies of a low face-to-face member-contact organization. Specifically, such a study would reveal whether the identification messages celebrating the individual and the organization primarily through a mediated environment are effective in terms of gaining the identification of individual members. This would reveal in turn whether members socially identify with the organization and consequently, exhibit behaviors that reveal organizational commitment, support and loyalty (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Studies have shown identification is a complex process and that the nature of social interactions plays a major role in creating the sense of identification. Pratt (2000) found socialization through effective social interactions led to the divestiture of the original identities of new Amway members and the creation of new identities that displayed positive identification with the organization. In contrast, less effective social interactions led to feelings of deidentification (perception of no connection with the organization) and disidentification (feelings of hostility toward the organization). Hence, it would be interesting to explore whether communication of identification seeking messages primarily through a mediated environment and lack of opportunities for social interactions results in a sense of



identification, deidentification or disidentification with the organization. This would reveal in turn whether social interactions, especially face-to-face interactions, are a prerequisite for creating a sense of organizational identification.

In addition, future studies should also look for messages that may have the potential for disidentification with the organization. Specifically, future research could look at how the presence of such messages, in addition to identification seeking messages, could influence the extent to which individuals identify with the organization. Moreover, in view of the fact that the nature of organizing may be a major factor that determines the kind of identification strategies that an organization may adopt, future research could also identify other unconventional forms of organizing and examine their identification strategies. This could strengthen the fact that the nature of organizing is indeed the determining factor in decisions regarding the choice of identification strategies.

Other avenues for future research include exploring whether the identification strategy of attempting to create symbolic convergence through the publication of member testimonials is creating an imagined sense of community and consequently, feelings of organizational identification. According to the Bormann's symbolic convergence theory (1985, 1986), symbolic convergence emerges through the sharing of fantasies. Bormann (1985) defined fantasy as "the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group's psychological or rhetorical needs" (p. 130). The sharing of fantasies, according to Bormann, results in group identification and a feeling of community.

It would also be interesting to look at organizational identification strategies of an organization at different periods in its life. This in turn would reveal changes in organizational identification strategies prompted by organizational and environmental changes and organizational changes prompted by the need for enhancing the identification of members. In the case of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, it would be interesting to explore the organizational identification strategies it pursued since its inception. The main limitation of this study is that apart from the organizational website, it examined only publications between fall 2006 and spring 2008. A better understanding of the identification strategies requires an examination of organizational communications published during other periods. Moreover, a report of the president of the organization reveals the organization has changed its bylaws to permit more student participation in its affairs effective from 2010 (Rogow, 2007). After more than a century since its inception, why is the organization undertaking such a major organizational change? Is it sensing a lack of identification on the part of its student members? Future studies should look at exploring these areas.

Thus, the study has revealed interesting areas of future research that would enhance the breadth and depth of organizational identification literature. Specifically, in future studies, the linking together of organizational identification strategies and the consequences of those strategies on the identification of members with the organization, could lead to the generation of context-specific knowledge in the area of organizational identification. Studies have mainly used standardized questionnaires. These instruments do not make any reference to

context-specific identification messages. This has led to loss of valuable insights pertaining to organizational identification as the inquiry processes have been de-contextualized, making it difficult for the respondents to provide information regarding the nature of their identification.

### Conclusion

The study, by exploring the identification strategies of a low face-to-face member-contact organization, has raised interesting issues that have the potential to guide inquiry in the future. It has pointed to the fact that nature of organizing may lead to the adoption of unique identification strategies and that the manner in which identification-seeking messages are constructed may enhance the identification strategy that is employed. The identification seeking messages were communicated through mediated forms of communication. This strategy of communicating identification-seeking messages through a one-sided mediated form of communication raises an important area of inquiry that needs to be undertaken considering the current pervasiveness and importance of technology in organizing. Specifically, there exists the need to explore the impact of the communication of identification seeking messages primarily through a mediated environment on individuals' sense of identification with the organization. Findings of such a form of inquiry could have implications for mediated forms of organizing, in general, as more and more organizations are creating mediated organizational structures as a cost-cutting strategy and as a means to overcome the barriers posed by time and space. Hence, it is pertinent that organizational identification in the context of low face-to-face member-contact organizations be explored, considering the strategic importance of mediated communication for present day organizations.

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